

TRIO

A Fable of Futurity

by Winston F. Marks

(from Science Fiction Quarterly, Vol.3, #2, August 1954)

THE COCKROACH was the first to break the telepathic silence which is the rule among lowcaste insects of different species.

Being of a gregarious, " nature, the roach had suffered most these long months of silent durance. It was, therefore, quite natural that he should be the first to lose his reticence. He cocked an antenna to left and to right at the adjacent, copper-mesh cages and beamed, "You spider, you ant, I propose a parley."

The black widow pulsed her belly with its brilliant, red-orange figure eight, and said nothing. The ant looked the other way but responded delicately, "To what purpose? I do not condone idle chit-chat -- and you realize this is verbal miscegenation."

The roach, frankly, having no purpose other than to pass the time of day and dispel the unutterable boredom of the dreary laboratory, felt properly repulsed for his breach of etiquette and fell silent. If this were only a restaurant, or even one of the untidier human homes, he could long since have called up some company of his own species; but it was his luck to be captive in this ludicrously sterile chamber of test-tubes and microscopes.

Strangely, the ant followed up its rebuff with a further remark, still quite formal, but containing a note of practical curiosity. "If you have a plan to escape, then we might be justified in holding such a council. This inactivity is extremely trying."

"It's the loneliness that gets me," the roach said, hoping he had something going.

"I'm not in the least interested in what gets you," the ant informed him impatiently. "Do you have a plan for escape? Put up or shut up!"

The spider broke radio silence for the first time. "Nuts!" she said. "You've never had it so good! All we want to eat, nothing to do but sleep, no natural enemies--"

"No enemies?" the roach broke in. "Are you crazy, lady? What do you call this joker in the long white coat? Maybe you enjoy having that needle sunk into you twice a day, but I don't. And look what he's done to us. What good is a roach two feet high and six feet long?"

The ant said, "We could simplify that by asking 'what good is a roach, period,' but that won't get us anywhere. I agree that the human is our enemy."

"Nuts again," said the spider. "I'm not going to bite the hand that feeds me. Those little needle jabs don't bother a bit; in my game you get used to being stung. As long as he keeps up the supply of rats and rabbits he can sting me often as he likes."

The ant rubbed its antenna. "I have news for you that you might find distressing; the experiment is almost over. In a few days we are to be killed and pickled in a vat of formaldehyde. No more horsemeat, rabbits and honey for us."

"If we are dead," the spider pointed out logically, "then we won't miss them. Until then, eat, drink and shut up! I want to sleep."

The roach, too, scoffed at the dismal prediction. "How did you figure out this formaldehyde business? You must have been letting your honeyration ferment."

THERE WAS a considerable silence, then the ant admitted reluctantly, "I've been probing the human's mind."

"What?" exclaimed the spider.

TRIO

A Fable of Futurity

by Winston F. Marks

(from Science Fiction Quarterly,
Vol.3, #2, August 1954)

THE COCKROACH was the first to break the telepathic silence which is the rule among lowcaste insects of different species.

Being of a gregarious," nature, the roach had suffered most these long months of silent durance. It was, therefore, quite natural that he should be the first to lose his reticence. He cocked an antenna to left and to right at the adjacent, copper-mesh cages and beamed, "You spider, you ant, I propose a parley." The black widow pulsed her

belly with its brilliant, red-orange figure eight, and said nothing. The ant looked the other way but responded delicately, "To what purpose? I do not condone idle chit-chat -and you realize this is verbal miscegenation." The roach, frankly, having no purpose other than to pass the time of day and dispel the unutterable boredom of the dreary laboratory, felt properly repulsed for his breach of etiquette and fell silent. If this were only a restaurant, or even one of the untidier human homes, he could long since have called up some company of his own species; but it was his luck to be captive in this ludicrously sterile chamber of test-tubes and microscopes.

Strangely, the ant followed up its

rebuff with a further remark, still quite formal, but containing a note of practical curiosity. "If you have a plan to escape, then we might be justified in holding such a council. This inactivity is extremely trying."

"It's the loneliness that gets me," the roach said, hoping he had something going.

"I'm not in the least interested in what gets you," the ant informed him impatiently. "Do you have a plan for escape? Put up or shut up!"

The spider broke radio silence for the first time. "Nuts!" she said. "You've never had it so good! All we want to eat, nothing to do but sleep, no natural enemies--"

"No enemies?" the roach broke in. "Are you crazy, lady? What do you call this joker in the long white coat? Maybe you enjoy having that needle sunk into you twice a day, but I don't. And look what he's done to us. What good is a roach two feet high and six feet long?" The ant said, "We could simplify that by asking 'what good is a roach, period,' but that won't get us anywhere. I agree that the human is our enemy."

"Nuts again," said the spider. "I'm not going to bite the hand that feeds me. Those little needle jabs don't bother a bit; in my game you get used to being stung. As long as he keeps up the supply of rats and rabbits he can sting me often as he likes."

The ant rubbed its antenna. "I have news for you that you might find distressing; the experiment is almost over . In a few days we are to be killed and and pickled in a vat of formaldehyde. No more horsemeat, rabbits and honey for us."

"If we are dead," the spider pointed out logically, "then we won't miss them. Until then, eat, drink and shut up! I want to sleep."

The roach, too, scoffed at the dismal prediction. "How did you figure out this formaldehyde business?"

You must have been letting your honeyration ferment."

THERE WAS a considerable silence, then the ant admitted reluctantly, "I've

been probing the human's mind."

"What?" exclaimed the spider.

"What?" ejaculated the roach." And you were reluctant to communicate with a fellow insect! Of all the hypocritical . . . "

"I-I don't expect you to understand," the ant replied, "but, I couldn't stand being cooped up with nothing to do; so I have busied myself studying the human culture. It was, I will grant, a most corrupting experience; you have no idea what wickedness they..."

"I don't want to hear about it," said the spider.

"I have never pretended to understand an ant's behaviour," the cockroach said, "but you can't excuse this perversion on

grounds of your sacred industry. I've never heard anything so --so irregular." The ant bristled under the opprobrium. "Either you lie, or you are entirely without race memory. The annual Council of Ten Thousand specifically appoints members of strategic species to keep mental contact with the human race. As you should very well know, we are destined to rule the earth; how else can we know when the time is ripe to attack these brutal monsters if we do not maintain contact?"

"Are you one of the appointed?" the roach demanded.

"No . . . but under the circumstances, my nature demands that I be useful; so I made the sacrifice. You, spider, should

understand --even if the roach doesn't -- since the majority of watchers appointed are spiders."

The black widow spoke from a half torpor. "Only because house-spiders are in the most strategic position to observe --not because we relish the job."

"I quite anticipated your slothful attitudes," the ant said scornfully. "I have top priority information that belongs in the hands of the Council of Ten thousand; but I knew better than to broach the subject to a couple of belly-conscious, self-centered idiots like you two."

The gossip-loving roach sensed that the conversation, loathsome as it had been, was sinking into a morass of

disagreement. "Tell us about it," he said.

"Unless you have a practical plan for escape, there is no point," the ant snapped.

"Come on," the roach wheedled, if there is reason enough, perhaps we can dream up a plan; eh, spider?" There was no reply from the black widow; she drowsed in a corner, having lost all interest. UNDER THE roach's persistent pleading, the ant finally broke down. "The information I have will change history," it began, "if we can convey it to the proper authorities; it concerns this experiment.

"The greatest handicaps we insects suffer is our small size. We are infinitely better organized than the human race,

and we can outbreed them a billion to one; but they hold the power inherent in their greater size."

"Nonsense," the roach argued. "Look at the elephant, the horse, and a dozen other larger creatures! Man pushes them around worse than he does us; we are only nuisances to him."

"Oh. I'll grant you that his opposing thumb and perverted brain are formidable advantages," the ant conceded. "We know now that we should have attacked centuries ago, before man developed his present science. I'll even admit that we might never have developed such a science if we were the dominant class. But here's my point: Now that the science does

exist, we can grasp it; the only obstacle before us is our tiny size."

"Of what survival-value is science to an insect?" the roach derided. The ant peered through the coarse mesh at him. "You are incredibly stupid, even for a cockroach. Look at yourself, six feet long; look at me almost four feet; and the widow, here --no number of pink-faced humans could subdue her without weapons."

The roach assented, "That's for sure; but the humans do have weapons."

"And so will we," the ant pointed out, "if we break out of here with the information of how to force this remarkable growth with these glandular injections."

"You have that information?"

"Of course; it is in the mind of this scientist who keeps us captive. We are large enough to handle the hypodermics, and I have the formulae memorized so we can extract our own glandular juices. The principal ingredient is pituitary substance, and we have the whole insect and animal world to draw on. Once we have a few dozen of our species developed into useful size, the process will mount at a geometric rate; in a year we can be ready to attack!"

THE PLAN sounded uncomfortably logical to the roach. Being of a non-militant nature he hedged philosophically. "What moral basis do we have for such an attack on the human

race?" The ant reacted violently to the defensive question. "The human race is the most immoral in the whole animal world. They are lustful, greedy, vicious --they kill wantonly, even their own kind. Killing for food is understandable, but they kill animals for pleasure --they call this sport. They kill insects out of sheer annoyance --and they murder each other wholesale, out of nationalistic pride --they call this war.

"You see, the laws of civilization can't be applied here; morality as we know it doesn't exist in the minds of men."

"But," the roach objected, "if we slaughter men, aren't we forsaking our own standards of morality and reducing

ourselves to their level? This smacks of expediency, and justifying brutal means to a desirable end."

"It is a matter of survival," the ant explained patiently. "Wan is becoming more and more intolerant of the insect population; some day he may take steps to eradicate us entirely." The roach was impressed. "The dirty parasite!" he muttered; "He's a scourge on the face of the earth!"

"That's the spirit," the ant cried. "Now --how are we going to break out of here?" That was the puzzler. "I could tear open this flimsy screen easily," the roach said, "if it didn't paralyze me each time I touched it."

"That's electricity," the ant said. It

explained the new concept in some detail to the roach, drawing on its exhaustive store of knowledge gained from the scientist's brain.

"It's the same force that the man carries in that prod he threatens us with, when he comes to stick the needles into us. The only time he turns off the power to the outside screen is when he holds the prod, ready to stun us."

The roach thought this over. His understanding of the electrical theory was vague, but he did grasp one important point. "You say we must be standing on the metallic floor of our cages before the power will flow through us from the cable and prod?"

"That's right," the ant said; "that way

we close the circuit, and the shock stuns us."

"Then the same holds true for the walls of the cage. When we stand on the floor and touch the walls--"

"Exactly! You see," said the ant, "these scientific concepts are not too difficult to grasp, when even a cockroach can understand them."

This rankled the roach. "If you are so superior," he demanded, "then why haven't you figured out the obvious way to escape?"

"Obvious?"

"Of course. If we leap clear of the floor, we can touch the cage without being shocked; and once I get hold of that silly wire, I can rip it to shreds."

It was the ant's turn to be impressed "Well, I'll be. . ."

The roach rubbed it in. "The trouble with you ants is you're too regimented; your imagination is stunted."

"Nonsense," the ant exploded. "Without my enterprise, neither of us would have gained the insight into electricity in the first place; but let's quit quibbling and break out of here.'

WITHOUT ado, the ant launched itself into the air against the soft copper screening. Content to sit back and watch, the roach observed that it wasn't even necessary to tear at the wall. The ant's mighty lunge and considerable weight burst through the thin barrier, and it landed on all six on the rubber matting

that formed the floor of the laboratory.

"Come on," the ant said, stepping up to the roach's cage and ripping the face of it asunder with two slashing forelegs. "We must gather up all the needles and hypodermics in the place. Those two drawers over there. You get them while I get the pituitary extracts from this cabinet." They worked swiftly, but when they were through there was a considerable pile of supplies in the middle of the room. The ant looked at it doubtfully. "How are we going to carry all this?" Once more the roach came through. "The spider," let's wake her up, and she can help."

"o yo think she'll cooperate?"

"Of course, and hurry. It's feeding

time; the man will be here any minute. We must be ready to destroy him."

Even as the roach spoke the slam of a car door outside the little concrete building announced the arrival of their human keeper.

The ant charged at the cell and caved in the screen. Once inside it pulled impatiently at the long, sensitive hairs on the black widow's spindly legs. "Wake up! We're getting out of here," the ant cried impatiently.

"What --what's going on?" The spider awoke, trembling with excitement.

"We've broken loose," the ant explained. "The man is coming right now; so if you don't want to be stunned silly, get out there and help us take care

of him. Why don't you sting him.? That will be easiest." The widow arched through ther gaping hole gingerly and looked around. "You've practically wrecked the place. The man will be angry."

"He'll be dead if you do your part " the roach said, watching the door closely as the footsteps drew nearer.

The ant snapped, "Quit eyeing those rabbit-cages and get behind that door. When he comes in--" THE ROACH and the ant were side by side at the pile of supplies, so it was easy. The black widow bellied down for an instant and leaped, landing astride the two of them. A pair of lightning jabs between thorax and head, and she was mistress of the

situation.

Moving with haste she stuffed the limp, ungainly roach back in his cage and returned for the paralyzed ant. Although the venom had effectively reduced all physical resistance, the ant's brain sent a barrage of invective against the spider as she jammed the ant in its cage.

The key was rattling in the door, so with one longing glance at the rabbit cages, she skittered to her own cage and stepped back into it.

The door swung open, a horrified gasp emitted from it and it swung shut with a heavy bang. The key turned, and footsteps retreated heavily and rapidly.

"Now see what you've done," the ant

railed. "The whole human race is alerted against us; we'll never escape."

The widow moved from her quarters again and crossed to the rabbit hutch, where she selected two juicy specimens for her dinner.

The roach, by now, had gathered its terrified wits together and was reproaching the ant. "Another tactical blunder," he said; "if you had briefed the spider on our plan she wouldn't have fouled us up." While the widow consumed her dinner, the roach bitterly related the wonderful plan for overthrowing the hated human race. "If it hadn't been for your stupid actions we'd have become rulers of the world in a few years," he concluded.

The widow discarded the second furry carcass and wiped her beak delicately on a foreleg. "My mother was a delegate to the last Council of Ten Thousand," she said; "I assure you, your plan has no merit."

"How so?" the ant and roach cried together.

"For two splendid reasons," she replied with a bored air. "First, if it became known among insects how to grow to such great sizes, we should be warring among ourselves shortly. With such large bodies to feed, the world food-supply would diminish to a dangerous level; we would find ourselves in precisely the same quandry that mankind finds himself.

"Secondly, at the last Council meeting, coordinated information indicated that man is on the verge of destroying himself with one of his foolish gadgets --the hydrogen and atom bomb, I think mother said."

The roach fell silent. The ant had been a fool after all.

"But I tell you," the ant screamed with mental vibrations that ripped the ether, "if we don't escape, we will all, three die in a vat of formaldehyde very soon!"

"So how will that harm my race?" the cockroach snarled in thorough disgust. The black widow explained, "The ant is paying the penalty for unauthorized searching of man's mind; the ant has contracted man's most distressing

disease. It is the disease which drove mother insane."

"It is a disease of the brain," the widow said, lowering her red-orange belly to the cool, metal floor for a nap. "They call it *fear*."